

# The Philosophy of the proto-*Wenzi*<sup>1</sup>

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## 0. Introduction

The *Wenzi* 文子 is a lengthy Daoist text that mostly consists of sayings by Laozi 老子, as recorded by his disciple Wenzi. Held in high regard for centuries, the *Wenzi* was read by rulers, ministers, and priests, stored in imperial libraries, quoted in anthologies of literature, and honored with several commentaries. In the Tang dynasty, the text was even granted the title *True Scripture of Communion with the Mysteries* 通玄真經 and added to the curriculum for the official exams, along with other Daoist writings such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and the *Liezi* 列子. Following the rise of Neo-Confucianism and the maturation of textual criticism, however, scholars started questioning the text's authenticity. They eventually came to see it as a forgery 偽書 that was created between the Han and Tang dynasties, a judgment that effectively consigned the *Wenzi* to oblivion. For centuries, scholars rarely referred to the *Wenzi*.

Then, unexpectedly, in 1973 a bamboo manuscript titled *Wenzi* was discovered in a Former Han dynasty tomb.<sup>2</sup> The tomb was probably closed in 55 BCE and, judging by the handwriting on the bamboo strips, the manuscript must have been copied around that time. The spectacular discovery greatly enthused scholars, for it revealed the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and expanded version of van Els 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See *Cultural Relics* 文物 1976 no. 7 for a description of the tomb and its discovery, *Cultural Relics* 1981 no. 8 for a brief report of the excavation, and *Cultural Relics* 1995 no. 12 for a description and transcription of the *Wenzi* manuscript.

existence of a *Wenzi* long before the supposed forging of the text. Yet, the discovery also exposed fundamental differences between the text on the bamboo strips and the transmitted text. These differences suggest that the *Wenzi* had indeed undergone major revision between the Han and Tang dynasties, as scholars had long suspected. Notably, the unearthed bamboo strips correspond to only a few sections in the transmitted *Wenzi*, which are obviously based on an earlier version of the *Wenzi*. Most other sections in the transmitted *Wenzi*, however, are demonstrably drawn from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, a voluminous treatise of the Former Han dynasty (cf. Li 1996, Le Blanc 2000, van Els 2006). It thus appears that after the Han dynasty someone, or a group of people (hereafter “the editor(s)”), took up the earlier *Wenzi*, or whatever was left of it at the time, copied and modified numerous passages from the *Huainanzi*, and edited all this material into a stylistically homogeneous treatise in which most sections start with the phrase “Laozi says” 老子曰. This new *Wenzi*, which effectively replaced the earlier one, was probably created to meet the growing demand for Daoist writings following the collapse of the Han dynasty. The creation of the transmitted *Wenzi* is remarkable from historical, philological, and philosophical perspectives. Of equal if not greater interest, the disinterred bamboo strips offer fascinating insights into the philosophy of the proto-*Wenzi*, that is, the *Wenzi* that circulated in the Former Han dynasty, prior to the text’s radical makeover.

This article analyzes the philosophy of the proto-*Wenzi* as revealed by its only surviving copy: the excavated bamboo manuscript. Regrettably, this approach is hampered by the poor state of the manuscript at the time of its discovery. According to the archaeologists, soon after the tomb was closed, it was violated by robbers, who incidentally caused a fire. Due to the robbery and the fire, an unknown number of bamboo strips vanished, and the surviving strips were charred, broken, and in disorder when they were discovered in 1973. Worse still, the Tangshan earthquake of 1976 overturned the chest in which the strips were stored, causing further damage and delaying work on the manuscript for years. As a result, a transcription of the 277 surviving bamboo fragments was not published until 1995. Notably, those fragments contain only bits and pieces of the original arguments, which renders tentative any study of the text’s philosophy. Hence, for a fuller understanding of the proto-*Wenzi*’s philosophy, I refer not only to the transcribed bamboo strips, but also to the few corresponding passages in the transmitted *Wenzi*. Even though they may have been

modified by the post-Han dynasty editor(s), these passages, clearly based on the proto-*Wenzi*, may throw additional light on the philosophy of that text.

Clues in the bamboo manuscript suggest that the proto-*Wenzi* is likely to have been created in the early Former Han dynasty (Wang 1996, Ho 1998, Zhang 1998, van Els 2006). The text appears to have been conceived as a record of conversations between its two protagonists: King Ping 平王, presumably the first ruler of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, and his advisor Wenzi 文子. The surviving bamboo strips mention no utterances by other persons. Neither do they contain references to other thinkers or texts, with one notable exception: the *Laozi*. Numerous distinct parallels between proto-*Wenzi* and *Laozi* can be observed. Take, for instance, strips 2262, 0564, 0870, 0593, 0908, and 0775, respectively:<sup>3</sup>

[王曰：“吾聞古聖立天下，以道立天下，]

King [Ping] asked: “I have heard that the sages of the past founded the empire. They founded the empire in accordance with the Dao

[□何？”文子曰：“執一無為。”平王曰：]

How [did they do that]?” Wenzi answered: “They held on to the One and were non-active.” King Ping asked:

地大器也，不可執，不可為，為者販（敗），執者失

[Heaven and] Earth are a large vessel that cannot be held on to and cannot be acted on. Those who act on it, ruin it. Those who hold on to it, lose [it]

是以聖王執一者，見小也；無為者，

Therefore, when sage kings hold on to the One, they see the small; when they are non-active,

也，見小故能成其大功，守靜□

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<sup>3</sup> The four-digit numbers, such as 2262, refer to the transcription of the *Wenzi* manuscript in *Cultural Relics*. The bamboo strips of Dingzhou were found in disorder and the research team assigned a sequential number to each strip before arranging them into texts, which explains why *Wenzi* strips are not numbered consecutively. Square brackets enclosing Chinese graphs indicate that these graphs were present on the bamboo strips, but are no longer legible after the Tangshan earthquake caused further damage to them. These graphs are now available in transcription only, on note cards made prior to the quake. Graphs between round brackets are readings suggested by the editors of the transcription. For example, 販（敗） means that the graph 販 on the bamboo strip should be read as 敗 *bai* ‘to ruin’. Modern punctuation in the Chinese text has been added by the editors of the transcription. The □ mark in the transcription represents an illegible graph. Occasionally, when the meaning of illegible graphs, or graphs that do not appear on the bamboo strip, can be inferred from the context or from the parallel in the transmitted text, I have inserted such inferences in my translation, between square brackets. Finally, the // symbol represents traces of silk thread that were used to bundle the text.

By seeing the small, they could succeed in their great achievement. By preserving quietude

下正。”平王曰：“見小守靜奈何？”文子曰：  
paragon for the empire.” King Ping asked: “To see the small and preserve quietude, what does that mean?” Wenzhi answered:

Whether or not these bamboo strips originally belonged together in one passage, they all correspond to one section in the transmitted text, *Wenzi* 5.7, where the original protagonists, King Ping and Wenzhi, are replaced by Laozi and Wenzhi. In other words, the editor(s) changed the discussion from a ruler-advisor context to a master-disciple context. Here is the beginning of *Wenzi* 5.7, with text corresponding to the bamboo strips underlined and the number of each bamboo strip added between square brackets:

文子問曰：古之王者，以道蒞天下[2262]，為之奈何？老子曰：執一無為[0564]，因天地與之變化，天下大器也，不可執也，不可為也，為者敗之，執者失[0870]之。執一者，見小也[0593]，小故能成其大也，無為者，守靜[0908]也，守靜能為天下正[0775]。

Wenzhi asked: “The kings of the past founded the empire in accordance with the Dao. How did they do that?” Laozi answered: “They held on to the One and were non-active. They followed Heaven and Earth and transformed with them. The empire is a large vessel that cannot be held on to and cannot be acted on. Those who act on it, ruin it. Those who hold on to it, lose it. Holding on to the One is to see the small. Seeing the small they could succeed in their greatness. Being non-active is to preserve quietude. By preserving quietude they could be paragons for the empire.”

Differences between the two *Wenzi*'s (bamboo manuscript and transmitted text) notwithstanding, influence from the *Laozi* is obvious. The concept of “seeing the small” 見小 is explained in what is now *Laozi* 52 as “perspicacity” 明, or the ability to meaningfully interpret minute changes in society as the possible portents of misfortune. The concept of “holding on to the One” 執一 resembles the *Laozi* concepts of “embracing the One” 抱一 or “getting hold of the One” 得一, which are generally interpreted to be a form of meditative practice aimed at achieving union with the Dao 道. The concept of “being non-active” 無為 plays a vital role in the philosophy of *Laozi*. The phrase “to found the empire in accordance with the Dao” 以道立天下 occurs verbatim in *Laozi* 60. The idea of “becoming a paragon for the empire” 為天下正 through “preserving quietude” 守靜 derives from *Laozi* 45. And

the idea of the world as a large vessel that “cannot be held on to” 不可執 is a reference to *Laozi* 29.

The numerous references to the *Laozi* throughout the bamboo manuscript (cf. Ding 2000: 31-37, 70-72) suggest that the proto-*Wenzi* was profoundly inspired by that text. Like the *Laozi*, the proto-*Wenzi* advocates a philosophy of quietude, in which the ruler should not try to actively control the empire, but simply follow the natural course of things. He must be perceptive and observe small but possibly disruptive changes in his realm, and respond to them in an unassertive, tranquil manner.

That *Laozi* is the principal source of inspiration for the proto-*Wenzi* does not preclude differences between the two texts. Notably, the proto-*Wenzi*'s treatment of the *Laozi* is neither exhaustive nor systematic. Distinctive *Laozi* notions such as “simplicity” 朴, “spontaneity” 自然 and “knowing contentment” 知足, are not mentioned on the surviving *Wenzi* bamboo strips. Conversely, the unearthed bamboo strips approvingly speak of terms that the *Laozi* rejects, such as “humaneness” 仁, “righteousness” 義 and “wisdom” 智. Indebtedness to the *Laozi* clearly did not stop the author(s) of the proto-*Wenzi* from promoting ideas that, at least on a first reading, run counter to its main source.

The following sections present the main aspects of the proto-*Wenzi*'s philosophy, with a focus on its intricate relationship with the *Laozi*. They show that the proto-*Wenzi* advocates a philosophy of quietude, not only in terms of its content, but also through the rhetoric it uses to create a harmonious synthesis of diverse, and at times even incompatible, ideas.

## 1. The Dao

Utterances by the King Ping character in the excavated *Wenzi* manuscript are normally brief and formal, but occasionally they are animated and emphatic, as on bamboo strip 0976:

□者。”平王曰：“[善。好乎道，吾未嘗聞道也。]

the one who ... .” King Ping exclaimed: “Excellent! I am fond of the Dao, though I have never been properly informed of the Dao.”

This euphoric statement emphasizes the importance of the Dao 道 in the proto-*Wenzi*. In fact, the Dao appears to constitute the basis of the text’s worldview. Two aspects of the Dao can be discerned from the bamboo fragments: (1) its cosmogonical dimensions, and (2) its political applications.

(1) The proto-*Wenzi* describes the Dao as the source of all things, for instance on bamboo strips 2466 and 0722:

生者道也，養□

That which engenders, is the Dao. [That which] nourishes

[子曰：“道產之，德畜之，道有博]

[Wen]zi answered: “The Dao produces them; Virtue nurtures them. In the Dao, there is profundity

Alluding to *Laozi* 51, these two fragments suggest that the Dao and Virtue engender and nurture all things, respectively. The Dao, in other words, is the cosmogonical source of all things, and all things depend on it for their birth and growth, as also expressed on bamboo strips 1181, 0792 and 2469:

元也，百事之根

the origin [...], the root of all tasks

生，待之而成，待

life, they depend on it for completion, and they depend

而生，待之而成，

and life, they depend on it for completion,

The Dao, while not mentioned on these broken bamboo strips, is almost certainly meant here, as the corresponding lines in section 5.1 of the transmitted *Wenzi* show:

夫道者，德之元，天之根[1181]，福之門。萬物待之而生，待之而成，待[0792/2469]之而寧。

Now, the Dao is the origin of Virtue, the root of heaven and the gate to good fortune. All things depend on it for their birth, they depend on it for their completion and they depend on it for their well-being.

The underlying cosmogonical principle here, as in *Laozi* 34, is that the Dao creates all things and that all things are therefore dependent on it for their existence.

(2) The political dimensions of the Dao receive even more attention in the proto-*Wenzi*, as King Ping's interest in the Dao is mostly pragmatic. For instance, he worries about "the mistake of lacking the Dao" 無道之過 (on bamboo strip 0780). *Wenzi* warns him that "those who occupy the throne while lacking the Dao are thieves of the world" 毋道立者天下之賊也 (2442) and that if he "does not steer the people by means of the Dao, they will abandon him and disperse" 不御以道則民離散 (0876). Conversely, *Wenzi* asserts that "rulers who possess the Dao are raised by Heaven, supported by Earth, and assisted by the spirits" 有道之君，天舉之，地勉之，鬼神輔 (0569) and that if the ruler is careful not to lose the Dao, he will lead the realm away from disorder, so that "the whole world will submit itself to him" 天下皆服 (0590). Such statements, however fragmentary, demonstrate the text's concern for the Dao as the guiding principle in the political realm.

If the ruler wants to rule in accordance with the Dao, he must emulate "the Dao of Heaven" 天之道, or the Dao as it appears in the natural world around us. The Dao of Heaven represents a process of natural growth that must be taken as a model for moral conduct. Consider these bamboo fragments (0581, 2331, 1178, 0871, and 0912):

產于有，始于弱而成于強，始于柔而  
was produced in "being." It began as weak and reached completion as strong.  
It began as soft and

于短而成于長，始寡而成于眾，始  
as short and reached completion as long. It began as few and reached  
completion as many. It began

之高始于足下，千[方之群始于寓強]，  
a height of [...] begins from under the feet, a crowd of a thousand sides begins  
with sheltering the strong

聖人法于天道，[民者以自下]，  
Sages emulate the Dao of Heaven, those who belong to the common people  
take this to lower themselves

卑、退、斂、損，所以法天也。”平王曰：

humility, retreat, restraint and reduction is what they use to emulate Heaven.”  
King Ping asked:

These thematically related bamboo fragments appear to belong together, for they occur, slightly modified, in one section, *Wenzi* 5.1, of the transmitted text:

夫道者，原產有始，始於柔弱，成於剛強[0581]，始於短寡，成於眾長[2331]，十圍之木始於把，百仞之臺始於下[1178]，此天之道也。聖人法之，卑者所以自下[0871]，退者所以自後，儉者所以自小，損之所以自少，卑則尊，退則先，儉則廣，損[0912]則大，此天道所成也。

Now, the Dao in its original production has a beginning. It begins as soft and weak and reaches completion as hard and strong. It begins as short and few and reaches completion as many and long. A tree of ten armlengths in circumference begins as the size of a fist, a tower of one hundred feet in height begins at the base. This is the Dao of Heaven. Sages emulate this: through humility they lower themselves, through retreat they position themselves behind, through restraint they make themselves small and through reduction they make themselves few. By being humble they are honored, by retreating they advance, by restraining themselves they expand and by reducing they grow large. This is brought about by the Dao of Heaven.

With references to the idea of growth in *Laozi* 64, this passage describes the natural patterns of growth from small to large, short to long, weak to strong, and so on. Rulers should emulate this as a model for good conduct. If they want to aim high, they should lower themselves, position themselves behind, and make themselves small. If they sincerely practice becoming humble and small, they may eventually become mighty and exalted.

This idea of natural growth through the Dao is also expressed on bamboo strip 0916, which, again, borrows imagery from the *Laozi*:

江海以此道為百谷王，故能久長功。

The rivers and seas are kings of the hundred valleys because of this Dao. Therefore they can extend their achievements for a long time

This statement praises rivers and seas for their low position, as does *Laozi* 66. Rivers aimlessly flow downhill and tributaries spontaneously flow into them. Seas are naturally positioned below and all the streams eventually discharge into them. The rivers and seas serve as a metaphor for the ruler, who should strive to go with the



natural flow of things and position himself below, and thereby naturally and aimlessly gain the support of the masses.

## 2. The Four Guidelines

In the proto-*Wenzi*, the Dao is closely connected with Virtue 德. These two concepts often occur together, as when the text states, “the Dao produces them; Virtue nurtures them.” Once the Dao has given birth to the things, Virtue takes care of their growth. In this manner, the Dao and Virtue are complementary forces in the existence of all beings. The two concepts also occur as a binominal compound, for example on strips 2255 and 2252:<sup>4</sup>

[平]王曰：“子以道德治天下，夫上世之王

King Ping asked: “You may rule over the empire in accordance with the Dao and Virtue, but among the kings of the previous generations

□使桀紂脩道德，湯[武唯（雖）賢，毋所建]

... if Jie and Zhou had cultivated Dao and Virtue, then Tang and Wu, no matter how worthy they were, would have had no occasion to establish

The compound “the Dao and Virtue” is probably to be understood as broadly meaning “morality,” since the text suggests that if the tyrants Jie and Zhou had not been immoral, they could have avoided their miserable fates. Notably, the surviving bamboo fragments appear to mention the concept of Virtue and the compound, the Dao and Virtue, interchangeably in similar contexts. Hence, the distinction between Virtue used as a individual concept or in combination with Dao is probably just a matter of degree.

The proto-*Wenzi* associates Virtue not only with the Dao, but also with humaneness, righteousness and propriety. Consider these bamboo fragments (2466, 0600, 2259, 0591, 0895/0960, and 0811):

生者道也，養□

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<sup>4</sup> Liu Xiaogan (1994: 4-16) demonstrates that the Dao and Virtue first began to circulate in mutual conjunction in late Warring States texts. The combined mention of the two terms as a binominal compound on the bamboo strips is one of the indications of the proto-*Wenzi*'s late provenance.

That which engenders, is the Dao. [That which] nourishes

[不慈不愛], 不能成遂, 不正

If you do not show kindness and care, they cannot be successful. If you do not make them upright

之所畏也, 禮者民之所□也。此四

is what they hold in awe, and propriety is what the people [X]. These four

踰節謂之無禮。毋德者則下怨, 無

exceeding the regular intervals is called “lacking propriety.” Without Virtue, those below will feel resentment. Without

則下諍, 無義則下暴, 無禮則下亂。四

those below will forward criticism. If he lacks righteousness, those below will be violent. If he lacks propriety, those below will rebel. If these four

□立, 謂之無道, 而國不

... are not established, this is called “lacking the Dao” and when the realm does not

These fragments, in particular the latter ones, may have originally belonged together, for they all correspond to a coherent argument in one section of the transmitted text, *Wenzi* 5.3. This section collectively refers to Virtue, humaneness, righteousness and propriety as “the four guidelines” 四經:

故脩其德則下從令, 脩其仁則下不爭, 脩其義則下平正, 脩其禮則下尊敬, 四者既, 國家安寧。故物生者道也[2466], 長者德也, 愛者仁也, 正者義也, 敬者禮也。不畜不養, 不能遂長, 不慈不愛, 不能成遂, 不正[0600]不匡, 不能久長, 不敬不寵, 不能貴重。故德者民之所貴也, 仁者民之所懷也, 義者民之所畏也, 禮者民之所敬也, 此四[2259]者, 文之順也, 聖人之所以御萬物也。君子無德則下怨, 無[0591]仁則下爭, 無義則下暴, 無禮則下亂, 四[0895/0960]經不立, 謂之無道[0811], 無道不亡者, 未之有也。

Therefore, if you cultivate Virtue, those below will follow orders. If you cultivate humaneness, those below will not contend. If you cultivate righteousness, those below will be fair and upright. If you cultivate propriety, those below will be honorable and respectful. Once all four are cultivated, the realm will be secure and calm.

Therefore, what engenders things is the Dao, what makes them grow is Virtue, what makes them caring is humaneness, what makes them upright is righteousness, and what makes them respectful is propriety. If you do not nurture or rear them, they cannot be brought up. If you do not show kindness and care, they cannot be successful. If you do not make them upright and

irreproachable, they cannot live long. If you do not make them respectful and honorable, they cannot be valued highly.

Therefore, Virtue is what the people value, humaneness is what the people cherish, righteousness is what the people hold in awe, and propriety is what the people respect. These four are the sequence of cultivation and the means whereby the sage steers all things. If the ruler lacks Virtue, those below will feel resentment. If he lacks humaneness, those below will contend. If he lacks righteousness, those below will be violent. If he lacks propriety, those below will rebel. If these four guidelines are not established, this is called lacking the Dao. It has never occurred that someone who lacked the Dao did not perish.

The text puts the ultimate responsibility of implementing the four core values with the ruler. He should, for example, nurture those below him and show kindness and care, because otherwise the predicted negative consequences will materialize.

Each of the four guidelines has its own function: Virtue is valued because it makes the people grow; if it is properly applied, they will follow orders; otherwise, they will feel resentment. Humaneness is cherished because it helps the people care for others; if humaneness is properly applied, they will not contend; otherwise, they will engage in disputes. Righteousness is held in awe and if it is properly applied, the people will be fair and honest; otherwise, they will be violent. Finally, propriety is revered because it generates respect; when properly applied, people will be honorable and reverent; otherwise, they will rebel.

The four guidelines constitute a major difference between the proto-*Wenzi* and the *Laozi*. In the proto-*Wenzi*, each quality is indispensable in the process of bringing order to the realm. In the *Laozi* this is much less the case. For example, *Laozi* 38 states that the ruler should turn to Virtue only when he has *lost* the Dao, to humaneness only when he *no longer has* Virtue, and so on. The *Wenzi* sets the same hierarchy for the four qualities, but it only agrees with the *Laozi* on their succession, not on their regression. In the *Wenzi*, one quality is not worth more or less than another. The ruler needs all four. Indeed, when taken together, they are of equal importance to the Dao since failing to establish them equals lacking the Dao.

Notably, the *Laozi* in its various manifestations is not consistent in its views on humaneness, righteousness, and propriety. The Guodian 郭店 tomb (closed before 278 BCE) yielded three bamboo manuscripts, the precursors of what was later to

become the *Laozi*, that hardly mention humaneness, righteousness and propriety at all. For instance, the passage that is now *Laozi* 38, on the regression of humaneness, righteousness and propriety, does not appear in the Guodian texts. Criticism of these three values appears to have been introduced into the *Laozi* after the Guodian tomb was closed, most likely in response to growing importance attached to these notions by other thinkers, especially those in the Confucian line of thought (Qiu 2000: 61, Henricks 2000: 12-14). In the early Former Han dynasty, the tentative time of the proto-*Wenzi*'s creation, the *Laozi* already included this anti-Confucian polemic. Indeed, the two *Laozi* silk manuscripts discovered at Mawangdui 馬王堆 (closed in 168 BCE), open with what is now *Laozi* 38. The proto-*Wenzi* adopts the conceptual framework offered by the new polemical *Laozi*, that is, it mentions the four guidelines in the same succession, but distances itself from the *Laozi*'s harsh rhetoric. Instead, it appears to subscribe to contemporaneous positive appraisals of humaneness, righteousness, and propriety, so as not to affront fellow-thinkers who advocated these notions, while adapting their conceptual meaning according to its own persuasions. In so doing, the proto-*Wenzi* promotes ideas that run counter to the *Laozi*, its primary source. The most striking example in this respect is propriety. The *Laozi* rejects propriety as the lowest of all qualities, claiming that it “stands at the head of rebellions” 亂之首, but the proto-*Wenzi* asserts the very opposite: if the ruler “lacks propriety, those below him will rebel” 無禮則下亂 (0895/0960).

### 3. Sageliness and Wisdom

Perspicacity is another crucial element in the quietist philosophy of the proto-*Wenzi*. If the ruler does not want to have his reign disturbed by invasions, uprisings, or other calamities, he must perceive their very roots, so as to manage them at an early stage and in a deftly imperceptible manner. To describe this perspicacity, the proto-*Wenzi* uses, as we have seen, the *Laozi* concept of “seeing the small” 見小. In this connection, it also uses the two concepts of “sageliness” 聖 and “wisdom” 智, as on these bamboo strips (0896/1193, 0803, 1200, 0765, 0834, 0711):

知。”平王曰：“何謂聖知？”文子曰：“聞而知之聖也 wisdom.” King Ping asked: “What is meant by sageliness and wisdom?” Wenzi answered: “To hear something and recognize it is sageliness.

知也。故聖者聞//  
is wisdom. Therefore, the sagely man hears

而知擇道。知者見禍福  
and knows how to adjust the way. The wise man sees fortune and misfortune

[刑]，而知擇行，故聞而知之，聖也。  
shape and knows how to adjust conduct. Therefore, to hear something and recognize it is sageness.

知也成刑（形）者，可見而  
is knowledge. That which takes shape can be seen and

未生，知者見成  
has not yet appeared. The wise man sees [things] taking

The text on these bamboo strips can be found, in modified form, in this section of the transmitted text, *Wenzi* 5.5:

文子問聖智。老子曰：聞而知之，聖也 [0896/1193]，見而知之，智也。  
聖人嘗聞 [0803] 禍福所生而擇其道，智者嘗見禍福 [1200] 成形而擇其行  
[0765]，聖人知天道吉凶，故知禍福所生，智者先見成形 [0834]，故知  
禍福之門。聞未生聖也，先見成 [0711] 形智也，無聞見者，愚迷。

Wenzi asked about sageliness and wisdom. Laozi answered: “To hear something and recognize it is sageliness. To see something and recognize it is wisdom. The sagely man constantly hears of where fortune and misfortune appear and adjusts his way accordingly. The wise man constantly sees fortune and misfortune taking shape and adjusts his conduct accordingly. The sagely man recognizes the good and ill portents of the Dao of Heaven and therefore knows where fortune and misfortune appear. The wise man foresees their taking shape and therefore knows the gate to fortune or misfortune. To hear what has not yet appeared is sageliness. To foresee something taking shape is wisdom. Those who lack both hearing and sight are stupid and confused.”

The concepts of sageliness and wisdom also feature prominently in the *Analects* 論語, *Mencius* 孟子, *Xunzi* 荀子, *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, *Essay on the Five Forms of Moral Conduct* 五行篇 (the *Essay* for short), and other texts. The proto-*Wenzi*'s explanation of sageliness and wisdom is most similar to that in the *Essay*, a long-lost text for which manuscript copies were found in the Guodian and Mawangdui tombs. The proto-*Wenzi* and the *Essay* both juxtapose sageliness and wisdom, relate them to hearing and sight, regard them as extra sensitive forms of sensory perception, and use the phrases “to hear something and recognize it is sageness” 聞而知之，聖也 and “to

see something and recognize it is wisdom” 見而知之，智也 to express this idea. In both texts, sageliness is no ordinary form of hearing, but full awareness of what one hears, and wisdom no ordinary seeing, but full awareness of what one sees.

Despite these similarities between the two texts, there are notable differences. The *Essay* is essentially a text on improving moral conduct (Csikszentmihalyi 2004). It advocates the development of human character through the cultivation of five forms of proper conduct, with sageliness and wisdom as the highest forms. The proto-*Wenzi* is a politico-philosophical text in which these concepts are explained to a ruler (King Ping) and related to fortune and misfortune (two crucial terms that do not occur in the *Essay*). Fortunate and unfortunate events can be perceived through ordinary hearing or sight, but those who perceive them through sageliness and wisdom reach a deeper awareness. Ordinary people, using plain hearing and sight, perceive instances of fortune and misfortune only after they have appeared, and when it is too late to take action. They notice a rebellion only after it is well under way. Wisdom foresees fortune and misfortune; sageliness recognizes their earliest whisper. The ruler who masters these two is able to manage problems well before a crisis takes shape. As a result, the realm remains calm with only the perspicacious ruler knowing what had been brewing.

The proto-*Wenzi* may have borrowed the notions of sageliness and wisdom from earlier expositions on this topic, but it changed their conceptual meaning. Ignoring their original connotation of the highest forms of moral conduct, it sees them instead as modes of acute awareness that allows the ruler to foresee and prevent misfortune. In espousing these concepts in its worldview, the proto-*Wenzi* challenges the *Laozi*'s evaluation of them. While the earliest surviving versions of the *Laozi*, the three Guodian manuscripts, make little mention of sageliness and wisdom, later versions, like the two Mawangdui silk manuscripts of the early Former Han dynasty, denounce these ideas. For example, *Laozi* 19, the same chapter that condemns humaneness and righteousness, also urges the reader to “exterminate sageliness and discard wisdom” 絕聖棄智; and *Laozi* 65 criticizes those who “use wisdom to govern the realm” 以智治國 as being “thieves of the realm” 國之賊. The proto-*Wenzi*, conversely, argues that those who lack these qualities are ignorant. Once the *Laozi* had reached a standardized form, full of anti-Confucian polemic, the proto-*Wenzi* seems to respond

by softening the *Laozi*'s harsh rhetoric and ascribing positive functions to the qualities it attacks. Interestingly, the proto-*Wenzi* uses these supposedly Confucian notions to promote its Daoist philosophy of quietude.

#### 4. The Five Ways of Warfare

One topic that features prominently in the proto-*Wenzi* is war. Bamboo strip 1198, for instance, contains the question “May I ask about the way of troops and soldiers?” 請問師徒之道。Regrettably, the reply to this query does not survive. Bamboo strip 0619, furthermore, claims that “if you possess the Dao, you do not wage wars” 有道則不戰。But there may be occasions when even rulers who possess the Dao cannot steer clear of warfare. A brief discussion survives on several bamboo strips (2419, 0829, 0850, 2210, 1035, 0572, 2217, 2385, 2278, and 0914):

平[王曰：“王者]幾道乎？”文子曰：“王者[一道]。

King Ping asked: “How many ways are there to be king?” Wenzi answered: “There is only one way to be king.”

王曰：“古者有

The king asked: “In ancient times, there were

以道王者，有以兵

those who reigned on the basis of the Dao, and there were [those who reigned] on the basis of warfare

以一道也？”文子曰：“古之以道王者//，

How could there be only one way?” Wenzi answered: “Those who in the past reigned on the basis of the Dao

以兵王者

those who reigned on the basis of warfare

[者]，謂之貪[兵]。[恃]其國家之大，矜其人民]

is called ‘greedy warfare’. To presume on the sheer size of one’s realm and take pride in one’s people

眾。欲見賢于適（敵）者，謂之驕[兵]。義[兵]

sheer number, while desiring to appear more worthy than one’s enemies, is called ‘arrogant warfare’. Righteous warfare

道也。然議兵誅[□□□]，不足禁會]

the Dao. In that case, righteous warfare punishes ... .., is not enough to forbid meetings

[故王道唯德乎！臣故曰一道。”平王]

Therefore, the only royal way is that of Virtue! Therefore I say that there is only one way.” King Ping

The text on most of these bamboo strips appears, in modified form, in one section of the transmitted text, *Wenzi* 5.9:

文子問曰：王道有幾？老子曰：一[2419]而已矣。文子曰：古有[0829]以道王者，有以兵[0850]王者，何其一也？曰：以道王者[2210]德也，以兵王者[1035]亦德也。用兵有五：有義兵，有應兵，有忿兵，有貪兵，有驕兵。誅暴救弱謂之義，敵來加己不得已而用之謂之應，爭小故不勝其心謂之忿，利人土地，欲人財貨謂之貪，恃其國家之大，矜其人民[0572]之眾，欲見賢於敵國者謂之驕。義兵[2217]王，應兵勝，忿兵敗，貪兵死，驕兵滅，此天道也。

Wenzi asked: “How many ways of a king are there?” Laozi answered: “Only one.” Wenzi asked: “Formerly, there were those who reigned on the basis of the Dao and those who reigned on the basis of warfare. In what way are they one?” Laozi answered: “To reign on the basis of the Dao equals Virtue and to reign on the basis of warfare also equals Virtue. There are five ways of using the army: there is righteous warfare, reactive warfare, aggressive warfare, greedy warfare and arrogant warfare. To punish tyranny and rescue the suppressed is called ‘righteous.’ To have no choice but to rise in arms when the enemy has invaded is called ‘reactive.’ Not being able to hold back when quarrelling over a small matter is called ‘aggressive.’ To profit from other people’s land and desire other people’s goods is called ‘greedy.’ To presume on the sheer size of one’s realm and take pride in the sheer number of one’s people, while desiring to appear more worthy than one’s enemies, is called ‘arrogant.’ Righteous warfare leads to kingship, reactive warfare to victory, aggressive warfare to defeat, greedy warfare to death and arrogant warfare to annihilation. Such is the Dao of Heaven.”

This passage distinguishes five types of warfare and offers a name (based on its motive), a description and an assured outcome for each. Not all types of warfare are permissible and each leads to a different result. The respective outcomes of these wars tell us how the text evaluates them, that is, whether it approves (↑) or disapproves (↓) of them:

#	motive	description	outcome	↑ ↓
1	righteousness	to liberate suppressed peoples	coronation	↑
2	reaction	to resist invaders	victory	↑



3	aggression	to rage about trivia	defeat	↓
4	greed	to desire others' land or goods	death	↓
5	arrogance	to overpower a weaker enemy	annihilation	↓

This taxonomy of warfare exhibits a regression, with righteousness being the best motive and arrogance the worst. When the text states that “to reign on the basis of warfare also equals Virtue,” it probably refers only to righteous and reactive warfare.

The taxonomy of warfare in the proto-*Wenzi* probably derives from military-strategic contexts. Military writings, such as Sunzi's *Art of War* 孫子兵法 or the *Wuzi* 吳子, are larded with numbered lists, which, as Van Creveld (2002: 29) notes, serve as mnemonic devices for students of military thought and allow them to keep the essentials of warfare in mind. The *Wuzi*, for instance, speaks of the six circumstances in which to avoid conflict, the five affairs to which the general must pay careful attention, and the four vital points of warfare, to name but a few examples. Notably, one passage in *Wuzi* discusses five reasons for raising troops (Sawyer 1993: 208), a discussion that bears a remarkable resemblance to the proto-*Wenzi*. While taxonomies of various aspects of war rarely occur outside military-strategic contexts, one passage in *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor* 黃帝四經 distinguishes between three ways of warfare (Yates 1997: 141). The *Four Canons* are silk manuscripts discovered in the Mawangdui tomb. They are variously dated from the end of the Warring States period to the beginning of the Han dynasty, and contain a large number of passages on warfare. It appears that in the late Warring States and early Former Han periods, warfare had become an important topic in politico-philosophical writings such as *Four Canons* and the proto-*Wenzi*, which then started borrowing taxonomies of warfare from military-strategic contexts.

In their approaches to warfare, the proto-*Wenzi* and *Laozi* again differ. The *Laozi* emphatically rejects warfare. For example, *Laozi* 30 criticizes those who “intimidate the empire by a show of arms” 以兵強天下, and *Laozi* 31 labels weapons as “instruments of ill omen” 不祥之器, whereas *Laozi* 68 praises “the virtue of non-contention” 不爭之德. The proto-*Wenzi*, on the other hand, speaks approvingly of certain kinds of warfare. If this text indeed dates from the Former Han, as scholars now increasingly maintain, the difference between the two texts may lie in the fact that the Han dynasty was founded “on horseback,” and that a strong critique of

military campaigns would instantly lose a new text, such as the proto-*Wenzi*, readership. The founding of the Han dynasty can be explained as a campaign to liberate the people from suppression under Qin-rule, which may qualify as “righteous warfare” in the proto-*Wenzi*’s terminology. Moreover, raids by Xiongnu 匈奴 forces constituted an acknowledged and growing problem in the early Han. The proto-*Wenzi* keeps the possibility of countering these raids open with its category of “reactive warfare.” With this fivefold classification, the proto-*Wenzi* merely asks the ruler to carefully assess the war that he is about to wage and to continue only when he is absolutely sure that his campaign falls within the two permissible categories. The predicted outcomes for unpermitted wars are so serious that, rather than promoting warfare, the proto-*Wenzi*’s taxonomy is actually a mild form of persuasion against waging war. Hence, while it takes a different approach, its goals are the same as those of the *Laozi*. And that approach was demonstrably appealing in Former Han times. The *Book of the Han* 漢書 (74.3136) contains a memorial by Chancellor WEI Xiang 魏相, who used a taxonomy of warfare that looks remarkably similar to the one in the proto-*Wenzi*, to dissuade Emperor Xuan 漢宣帝 from sending an expeditionary force to attack the Xiongnu. The Emperor followed his advice and halted the campaign.

## 5. Conclusion

The proto-*Wenzi* was profoundly influenced by the *Laozi*, as the numerous examples show, but it readily deviates from its principal source, espousing concepts and promoting ideas that the *Laozi* rejects. Remarkably, even with its distinct approach, the proto-*Wenzi* arrives at a philosophy not unlike that of the *Laozi*. This is because the two texts mainly differ in rhetoric, not content. The *Laozi* contains a philosophy of quietude, but, at least in its received form, militantly opposes notions such as humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. The proto-*Wenzi* thoughtfully promotes these notions, thereby appeasing thinkers who likewise advocated them, while adjusting their conceptual meaning to its own worldview. The concept of wisdom, for example, is stripped of its original moral connotations and becomes a form of perspicacity that enables the ruler to predict and prevent misfortune. And whereas the proto-*Wenzi* approves of certain kinds of warfare, it describes the conditions for warfare such that it may have actually become more difficult for rulers to justify war. Hence, taking a tone much milder than that of *Laozi*, the proto-*Wenzi*

itself epitomizes a philosophy of quietude. Even the names of the two protagonists possibly reflect that quietist worldview: Is *wen* ‘civility,’ as in *Wenzi*, not an antonym of *wu* ‘martiality,’ and does *ping*, as in King *Ping*, not mean ‘peaceful, calm’?

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